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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended to assist persons interested in forming a student-centered adult basic education study group. The first section provides an overview of the skills taught in basic education programs. A section on approaches and attitudes emphasizes the importance of the following concepts to basic education groups: allowing students to direct learning, respecting students' experiences, creating the right atmosphere, working as a group, and deciding what to work on. The third section discusses the difficulties of measuring progress in basic education groups and describes the following components in a comprehensive assessment process: day-to-day records, regular structured evaluations, individual student files, informal group discussions, and individual discussions. The final section presents students' comments about their attitudes toward the program and accomplishments in the following areas: skills, new words, dictionary work, writing, history, health, discussion, and confidence. (MN)

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each one strengthens each one...

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The experience of some adult students in basic education groups

each one strengthens each one...

Written by: Avril Blay, Janis Novitzky
and Julia Rosenak

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Foreword

Many things have been said in the past about student involvement and student centred learning. Talk is all very well but this book shows that when words are put into action exciting things happen.

Students are often expected to be passive recipients of tutor controlled materials and teaching methods. We feel that anyone who is unsure about what involving students in all aspects of their learning will mean to them in terms of changes in attitudes and ways of working will find many of the answers in this book

Equally important, students who are unsure about taking a more active role in their learning should be reassured by the experiences of the students and tutors.

Kathy Turner
The National Students Association

Introduction

This book aims to give people interested in what is often called Basic Education an idea of what it is about. We hope it will also give those already involved a chance to consider the value of working in groups. We describe and try to evaluate what happened in a number of groups we were involved in as tutors. These classes were not necessarily typical: in this case all the students and tutors were women. One of the exciting and challenging things about basic education is that each group will have different ideas about how to run itself.

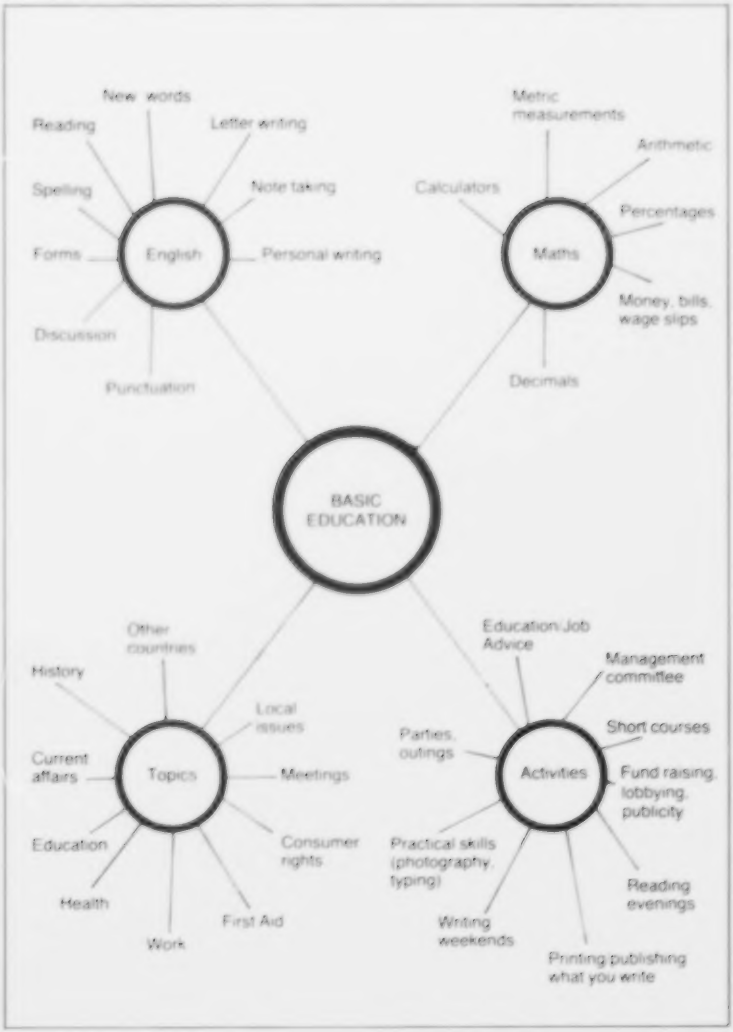
In the classes described here, some people were paid to organise and teach. Because of this it has been hard to avoid referring to some members of the groups as students and others as tutors. People will have their own views about the roles implied in dividing groups in this way. Such divisions are largely a question of attitude; we hope our attitude to such things is clear in the following pages. We also hope the book helps to explain the principles behind the way we worked, gives an idea of what went on in the groups, and tells you what the students thought of it.

Every group of people is different and, if you are thinking about setting one up or starting some basic education work in a group you are involved with, you may well find that your group wants to work in a different way or chooses a variety of ways over a period of time. If you want to discuss the ideas in this book or your own ideas for getting started, the address of the National Federation of Voluntary Literacy Schemes is at the end.

Cambridge House Literacy Scheme

What is Basic Education?

We don't much like the use of the word 'basic' to describe the sort of education we are talking about here. It implies that education takes place at different 'levels' and that without basic education a person may be, in some way, lacking. We would strongly challenge these ideas. The term may also conjure up thoughts of school and the 'three Rs' — the 'basics'. Of course, reading, writing and arithmetic are central to what we do, but basic education is more than this. It serves as a shorthand for a broader kind of education for adults which cannot be squeezed easily into a single term. This partly explains the difficulty in finding a word or phrase to describe fully the range of literacy, numeracy, English, general education and other activities to be found in 'basic' education groups. A huge number of subjects, ideas, skills and activities may be involved. The diagram on the next page will give an idea of the subjects that came up in the classes described here. Much of this book will show what went on in the groups and how the skills involved in reading and writing started from and wove in and out of these various themes, topics and activities.


BASIC EDUCATION
English
New words
Reading
Letter writing
Spelling
Note taking
Forms
Personal writing
Discussion
Punctuation
Maths
Metric measurements
Arithmetic
Calculators
Percentages
Money, bills, wage slips
Decimals
Topics
Other countries
History
Local issues
Current affairs
Meetings
Education
Consumer rights
Health
First Aid
Work
Activities
Education/Job Advice
Management committee
Short courses
Parties, outings
Fund raising, lobbying, publicity
Practical skills (photography, typing)
Reading evenings
Writing weekends
Printing publishing what you write

Attitudes and Approaches

or *how* you learn is as important as *what* you learn

Student direction of learning

We tried to involve students in as many aspects of the classes as possible, partly because it is a good basis for learning, but also because it was common sense to do so. Teaching and learning should not be dominated by the ideas of the tutors. People became interested and involved because they decided what and how to learn. Taking responsibility for your own learning is part of developing an independent and confident approach to education. The role of the tutors was to help students decide what they wanted or needed to work on and to suggest good ways of doing it. There needed to be plenty of opportunity for people to talk about what they hoped or expected the class to be like and what they wanted from it. For most people, this style of learning was new; in fact, any 'formal' learning as an adult was new, so it was sometimes difficult for them to say exactly what they wanted. It was the tutors' job to offer a wide range of possibilities and talk them through with students so they had the information they needed to make a choice. Student involvement did not mean that tutors were passive. This way of working made for more preparation as new work was constantly prepared in response to student demand, rather than following a text book or previously worked out course. As people got used to this approach and could see its value, students and tutors increasingly planned together. It was the tutors' responsibility to provide what was wanted by listening and responding to what the students said.

Respect for students' experiences

All adults have gained skills which they were not taught in school or college. Some may have many practical skills such as sewing, photography, or carpentry, or those learned in running a business or being involved in tenants' groups, trades unions, political groups or community action. Some people may have had the experience of coming to England from another country and of having to bring up a family against a background of hostility and prejudice. Acknowledging and respecting these adult skills had clear implications for what topics were studied. For example, issues such as health and diet and the position of women in society were very popular with most groups as they drew directly on their own experiences.

Most students shared a feeling that they had missed out on their education in the past. All had memories of school which affected their expectations of the classes and their feelings about returning to learning. It was important to be sensitive to these issues and allow for discussion of them in the first few sessions. In practice, this meant explaining our approaches to teaching and learning and often using the subject of education as a starting point for discussion, reading and writing. This happened in various ways: by exchanging memories of schools and teachers, by thinking about what helps someone learn and what gets in the way, by looking at how money for education is spent or by finding out about the history of schooling or education for adults.

One person wrote about the differences between her own schooling and coming to class:

> **'When you are a child you are sent to school by your parents. You are expected to do what the**

teacher tells you to do and sometimes, even if the teacher is wrong, you cannot tell him because you are afraid of getting punished. But with adult education you are more at ease with yourself because you are doing something you want to do. You can ask questions and discuss things without being afraid of speaking out of turn.'

The right atmosphere

Learning can be one of the great joys of life. We tried to prove this to the groups by aiming for a friendly, informal and enjoyable atmosphere where students felt at ease about asking questions, making mistakes or making jokes. A relaxed atmosphere is a necessary background to the real concentration and effort often involved in learning. People's previous experience of education had been based on competition between individuals. We aimed to offer a different way of working — a group, co-operative effort with teaching based on equality and trust. One student wrote:

'It is nothing like school where the teacher spoke *at* you rather than *to* you ..... you feel that the teacher is more like a friend, not someone who is above you.'

Working as a group

Generally, there were around six in a group, with a maximum of eight.

The first few sessions always centred on group work, as it was important for people to feel quickly at ease with each other and the tutor. Later, the idea of working more

individually was discussed but, by then, most groups were sure they wanted to work together:

> **'As we are in the class together we should be doing the same things — so we know what we're all doing and get help from each other.'**

> **'We are one and what one doesn't know the others will help out.'**

The strength of commitment to group learning meant that individuals were sometimes prepared to set aside their personal interests for a session:

> **'I would much rather work in a group than on my own, even though there were sometimes things I did not want to do.'**

Not all groups worked equally smoothly. As with any collection of people who spend time together, tensions could develop as well as strong feelings of mutual support. Every group had a different temperament above and beyond the personalities of its individual members and some groups were less supportive than others. However, the overwhelming reaction to group work was extremely positive.

Working as a group meant getting to know each other and discovering that other people had similar difficulties — at work, at home and with reading and writing. People were clear about the advantages they found in a small group setting. The chance to exchange ideas, help and encouragement was a powerful boost to learning:

> **'It is very nice to work with each other; we help one another and everyone is equal. Working together helps to push you more forward.'**

'Each one encourages each one. I think if you did work by yourself it would be more dragging and you wouldn't be so interested because you are more lonely but when you are in a group each one strengthens each one.'

The value of working together was linked to the equal and open relationships in the groups:

'I think working in a group is very stimulating. Everyone is equal. There are no top dogs.'

People's broadly similar backgrounds meant that they felt comfortable about airing their views:

'Because there weren't any young people we could talk about anything we wanted without being afraid of what we said.'

Group support was also important for sharing experiences and discussing particular situations:

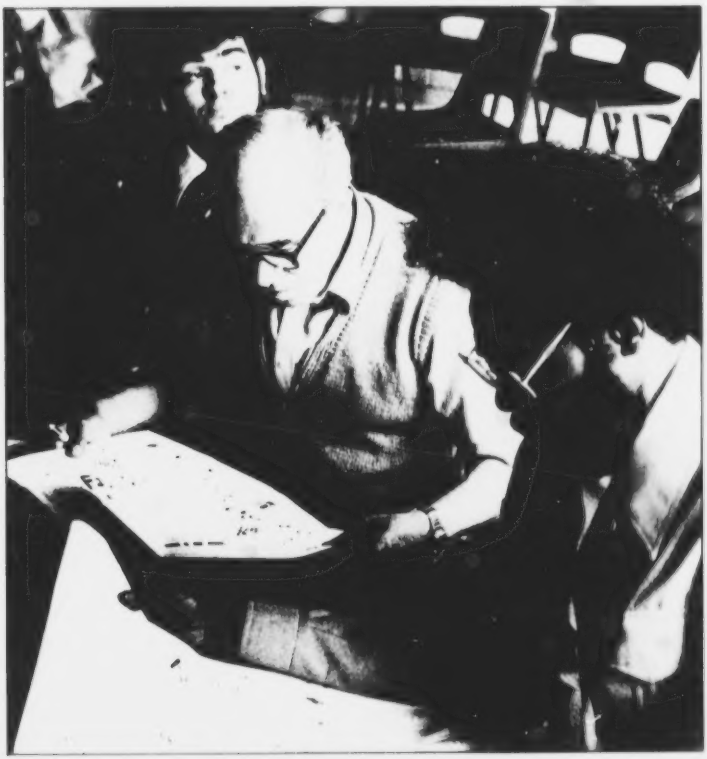
'Working as a group was great. We were able to discuss our problems. Maybe we found our problems to be quite similar and after some discussion we were able to either come to terms with the problem or sort it out.'

Most groups had the same tutor throughout their course. This worked well for continuity, but had the drawback that groups usually only experienced one person's teaching style. Although our approaches as tutors had many things in common, we each brought different ideas, methods and, of course, personalities to the groups. This said, the strength of group feeling helped to reduce the tutors' importance as group members became the main source of criticism, praise and encouragement.

Deciding what to work on

Having no set book for the courses meant that ideas for the content of sessions had to come from the students and tutors. We have said how important it was that students decided what to work on. This happened in different ways:

★ Topics often came from the practical demands of everyday life. Perhaps there was a letter that had to be



Beauchamp Lodge: weekend away, 1983

written or a form that needed completing. One group covered consumer rights because a student felt she had been 'done' by a market trader. Another group worked on the possible ways to get satisfaction from the local council's housing department. Writing to the tax office, finding out about self-certification forms for sick pay or looking at information from work all provided subject matter that people found relevant and of immediate use.

★ Individuals often suggested particular points or topics they wanted to cover or brush up. Usually other members of the group would be interested too. For example, when one group was reading and discovering how punctuation could affect meaning, a student mentioned that she was never sure when to use capital letters. This led to the whole group deciding to work on capital letters and punctuation.

★ Topical issues, news items, television and other media also suggested possible work. Often an interest in one subject led to others. For example, during elections, a discussion started on whether we should believe opinion polls. Looking at how the polls worked and the vocabulary used at election time raised questions about how people first got the right to vote. In turn, studying the history of the right to vote developed into a general interest in social history.

★ From time to time we found it useful to plan more systematically. This involved looking back over past work and discussing what we thought of it, how much we remembered and what needed more work. This was a good way of refreshing the memory and helped to assess what we had done as well as plan future work. Doing this together meant students were in control of how fast we worked, what

was studied and how much time was spent on different things.

Of course, groups and individuals differ, and some found it easier than other to shape the direction of their learning. One wrote:

> **'I would have liked a set plan of what we were going to do and get down to doing whatsoever it was.'**

Another saw the extent to which she was involved as one of the important differences between the classes and her experience of school:

> **'At school I knew what was coming — Science, Arithmetic ..... there was a set time for everything — some things I didn't like so much. But here I was always happy to do everything. We could choose.'**

When it worked, as it did for nearly all the students, involvement was seen as part of the equal relationships within the groups; being able to see what you want to learn and how you want to do it was a sign of progress itself:

> **'I feel that I was involved in deciding what we worked on because we always discussed what we wanted to do each day and decided together.'**

> **'The way the subjects were placed was by mutual agreement with all of us.'**

> **'It was quite satisfactory. I learned what I wanted to. I wasn't forced to do something I didn't want to do. I have no complaint on this one.'**

Beauchamp Lodge: writing weekend away, 1984

Making progress

Because 'basic' education covers such a wide range of skills, activities and ideas, progress cannot be simply expressed or measured in relation to one of them. It is also different for everyone: individuals have different styles of learning and progress may come slowly, in dramatic leaps or in fits and starts.

At the beginning of classes, students usually said that their main aim was to improve their ability to deal with the specific tasks involved in reading, writing and basic maths. The classes provided a chance to brush up on the skills they had not used much since leaving school and also a chance to extend what they could do. One student wrote:

> **'A lot of us left school at an early age and missed out on our education, so a course like this is like a revival. So when the opportunity was offered to me I did not hesitate to accept. For I have always wanted to do something about furthering my education, but I never had the time or the opportunity to do it. This has made me more self confident — it has made me more interested in my work and more determined to further my education.'**

Improving skills and learning new ones were important signs of progress, but other less obvious things were just as important:

— developing a respect for your own use of words
— seeing how writing and speech are connected
— finding reading fascinating rather than threatening
— seeing the written word as something you can criticise

— identifying what *you* want to work on
— being willing to try new things
— enjoying studying and learning

Assessment

Anyone learning anything wants and has a right to know how they are doing. But adult students of Basic Education demand more subtle and thorough forms of assessment than any formal tests or standardised procedures we have seen.

We did not use formal testing with the groups because:

1. Students often associate tests with failure and humiliation. Testing can create an atmosphere of competition and anxiety — which can get in the way of learning.
2. Freedom from formal assessment allows students to think, both as groups and individuals, about their own progress, rather than accepting outside judgements of themselves.
3. Assessment should be evaluating the whole learning process; not just one person's reaction to it. How far a class has met individual and group needs should be at least as important a question in any assessment as identifying individual progress. Formal tests work only on the latter.
4. Our approach to education places students firmly in the centre of the learning process. Formal testing limits this control and inevitably puts the tutor in a role which conflicts with the ways of working described here — with possibly damaging effects on relationships with students.
5. Formal tests don't listen to students.

Our objections to formal testing in Basic Education did not mean that we wanted to deprive students of the opportunity of joining courses which included tests and led to certificates. We continually discussed other course possibilities with students and made sure that advice and information was available.

How assessment took place

Assessment of how far the classes provided what students wanted and how individuals and groups were getting on took place in a variety of ways:

1. Day to day records

We kept careful records of each session. This included materials used, work covered, how it went and a note of any follow-on needed. We recorded signs of progress and comments which showed people becoming more confident about their learning. We never compared students with each other, only with their previous work. These notes also reminded students and tutors if a particular point needed reinforcing and were useful as a record of any particular individual needs that should be allowed for in future work. The daily record was essential for planning and for keeping a running list of students' suggestions.

We made it clear to students that the records were open to them. Ideally, we wanted students to write their own records but these particular groups had limited time. Students wanted precious time spent on course work rather than writing records and students asked the tutors to do it. We made sure that students knew the purpose and content of the record file by constantly referring to it when discussing work and by having it open and accessible where we worked.

2. Regular structured evaluations

These took the form of a review of work done and organisational points. Students were asked what they thought of how the work had been covered and whether they wanted more on a particular topic. The spacing of evaluations differed from group to group. Some wanted to write their opinions, others chose to record comments on tape. Time spent in this way was extremely useful as a way of revising and relearning things, deciding priorities for future work and helping students identify for themselves where they had made progress. Having a set time put aside purely for such discussions was an important way of making sure students were involved in all aspects of their learning.

3. Individual student files

Students kept their own files of materials and their own work. This was their personal record of what they had done — and a big help when discussing individual progress.

4. Informal group discussions

We tried (and usually succeeded) in spending at least a few minutes at the end discussing each session with students and confirming any decisions that had been made about the next session.Method and content were constantly reviewed and revised to respond to students' comments.

5. Individual discussions

Students discussed their progress and particular difficulties with the tutors. We tried to share our ideas about learning. For example, when working on spelling, the approach was to help students find ways of learning that worked for them rather than, say, work from lists of words. It was important for people to think about how they themselves learned best.

Staff meeting: walk-in-numeracy, 1986

What students said

This section gives examples of the sort of things students said they got from going to the classes.

Skills

> **'My spelling was very bad. Now I am much better.'**
>
> **'My spellings have started to improve. Having left school for 37 years, one is apt to forget spelling but the revival of lessons has improved it.'**

The importance of such improvements was often linked to feelings of confidence, control, independence and self respect. For example:

— when you can spot patterns in spelling .....

> **' ..... you understand the different kinds of words. It gives you more confidence with certain words.'**

— being able to check your own writing .....

> **' .... gives you independence. It gives you more control'.**

— learning about syllables .....

> **' ..... helps you know how to break up the words and to know that they are right.'**

— being able to fill in forms for work meant .....

> **' .... I don't need to go to my supervisor to do it now. I can do it myself.'**

Students often made links between work done in the groups and things they saw and heard around them:

> **'In the offices they've got all the names in alphabetical order.'**
>
> **'It is good to know what "syllables" means, I heard it on those radio quiz shows and didn't have a clue.'**

New words

Many students found that the chance to find out the meanings of new words, get a feeling for their shape and rhythm and improve their vocabulary gave them great satisfaction:

> **'It gave me more pleasure in my words.'**
>
> **'After we learned about that word "paramount", I kept seeing it all over the place. Before I would skip words if I didn't understand them.'**

People often brought in words they had come across to show the group. Once, for example, we discussed the word 'psychometric' which appeared on the hospital card for someone's child. Another time, one student was delighted to find the very word she wanted:

> **'Now I can call him a mysogynist!'**

Many students felt put down by people (often their children or managers at work) using long words or technical terms they did not know. Criticising and simplifying pompous or confusing language became a popular activity in some groups. We discussed the uses and suitability of complicated language in different situations and often found better and

clearer ways of putting things. One group rewrote a set of instructions after a session on first aid:

> **'Our writing is clearer. Those long words, ordinary people don't understand — only doctors and nurses.'**

Dictionary work

Using a dictionary was a key activity — not just for checking spellings and meanings — but also as the basis for other reference skills. One student had bought dictionaries for her children but never looked at them for herself. She said that she now spends time looking through the dictionary when she gets home. Another student had found trying to use a dictionary so frustrating that it was easier not to bother:

> **'I never liked the dictionary. To me it always took too long to find what I was looking for, but now I find it very interesting.'**

She has since taught her daughter how to use one.

Writing

Getting comfortable with writing was the best way to improve skills and feel in control of words. The only way to do this was to do a lot of it — to try out different sorts of writing and different ways of putting things. This was a new experience for most students:

> **'I haven't done writing for years.'**

Groups covered a range of writing from describing personal memories to writing opinions and from formal letters to friendly postcards. Writing memories and opinions was enjoyable and satisfying:

'It brought back our childhood days. Getting it on paper gets it off my chest.'

Sometimes writing helped fulfill an ambition:

'I wanted to tell my life story to my children and through this course I believe I will do it some day.'

Some students wrote letters to their Members of Parliament about an issue that concerned them. It was good to be able to organise an argument on paper, get a reply and then criticise that reply:

'His first paragraph is all one sentence: far too long. It needs more full stops. He should come to our class.'

Studying official letters as one of many different styles of writing helped to put 'formal' English in its place as just another tool; useful in a narrow set of circumstances (like dressing up for a job interview) but not the only way to write English well.

There was also the chance to get used to the style and structures of formal English and build on skills people already had:

'I'm sure most of us can write a business letter that we can understand, even though it might be written on three sheets of paper. But will the receiver understand it, and might we be able to put our point across in three paragraphs? It's worth knowing how.'

One student was relieved to find that:

'An official letter doesn't have to be long.'

There was variety in how we worked at writing as well as what we wrote. As well as individual writing, we also wrote as a group and in pairs:

> **'It helps if you work with someone else. When you write it's difficult to think of so many things at once. You're concentrating on the spelling so you forget what you want to write down. Then the other person reminds you.'**

The tutor or a cassette recorder also sometimes acted as a secretary, taking notes of what students wanted to say. It was the meaning that mattered most; writing was not just a mixture of spelling and punctuation. For most people too:

> **'The best thing was that we did it together.'**

History

After reading about the history of trade unions, one student (an office cleaner) told her group that she'd tested one of the office staff (a union representative) on the Tolpuddle Martyrs. History was always a popular subject:

> **'It gives me something to pass on to my grandchildren.'**
>
> **'We learnt about the history of education in this country. We didn't know only rich people got to learn in the past. That would make us ask questions. They wouldn't tell us that back home (in the West Indies), that poor people couldn't learn. England was paved with gold — the land of milk and honey.'**

Some groups read about the life of Mary Seacole, the black nurse who served in the Crimea. They compared her life with

that of Florence Nightingale, were shocked that Mary Seacole's story had been hidden for so long and proud of her contribution to both Caribbean and British history. Everyone asked:

'Why haven't we heard about her till now?'

Health

Reading a book about women's experiences of marriage, childbirth, medical treatment and herbal medicines (*Left in the Dark* by Eden Grove Women's Literacy Group) led us into warm and open discussions. We talked about how women were often cut off from information about their bodies. One group wrote to the authors of the book:

'It was good because everyone speaks their mind about it. The women in the book were frank. When we were small our parents never told us the truth. It brings things to light.'

For most students, *Left in the Dark* was the first book they had seen which was written by ordinary people — and by women:

It's good to know that it is only women who wrote the book. It's straightforward. It mentions things that other books don't mention'.

Students were keen to share their reading with members of other groups; word spread quickly about good books. There was a real interest in reading for pleasure and people borrowed books to read at home:

'I now tend to pick up a book more often but get impatient to finish.'

Top: Cambridge House, open day, 1981
Above: Gatehouse project — making a book

Discussion

Discussion was nearly always linked to reading and writing and groups were clear about its value:

> **'It gives you more confidence to exchange ideas.'**
>
> **'You get to know what the others are thinking.'**
>
> **'It makes it more of a group feeling.'**
>
> **'We debate on things. I like a little debate now and then. It relieves my frustrations.'**
>
> **'It's just as important as commas and full stops.'**

Discussion was part of thinking about what you read and sorting out what it meant:

> **'It makes sense of things.'**

It led to and flowed from reading and writing and helped break down the barriers between words spoken and those on paper.

Confidence

The subject of confidence was mentioned time and time again in students' evaluations of the classes:

> **'I thought I was too old to start learning but this is really marvellous. It gives you confidence. I am much more interested in things than I used to be ..... I think everyone's got something hiding inside them and this helps to bring it out.'**

'I wouldn't have felt so confident or determined without it. I'm now able to see ahead to a better future.'

'My English has improved and I also have more confidence in myself.'

The idea of confidence is a complicated one. We knew many of the women in the classes as strong, vocal and extremely capable people who had dealt successfully with some of the most difficult situations in life. Why, then, did they feel that this, rather than other experiences, had made them more confident? Part of the answer lay in the feeling of being more in control of written language:

'I used to ask my son to fill in my forms but not any more. I'll do it myself.'

Better reading could also bring knowledge and power:

'Some families know you can't do a thing. Then they can drop you and don't want to know you. They ignore you. Some of the husbands, if they can read, they can hide a lot of things from you'.

Skills and confidence in writing and reading had certainly been gained; but students seemed also to be referring to a more general gain in confidence. Perhaps, as our experience of ourselves and the world is expressed through language, being more in control of this process may alter the way you see yourself. Perhaps it is the value placed on the written word that makes people with less secure skills feel at a disadvantage in other ways too.

The effect of group support on these feelings was very important. The encouragement and praise that people

Gatehouse, open day

offered each other was a great boost to learning and self-image. As classes went on, increased confidence showed too in people being prepared to make mistakes and ask for help when they needed it. They also became confident about talking to others about the classes and felt that coming was something to be proud of.

To encourage others to join the class, one student wrote:

> **'Don't kid yourself into thinking that you are too old to learn, age is immaterial when it comes to learning. This course has done wonders for me, it's given me a new kind of confidence.'**

But confidence in literacy is not a route to strength of character. Students were already well supplied with that. The classes merely provided the right opportunity for them to realise it by having the experience of enjoying learning.

nfvls

The **National Federation of Voluntary Literacy Schemes** is an association of over 80 voluntary and community groups involved in basic education for adults. Some are specialist providers of education, whilst others use and learn reading, writing and numbers as part of a wider range of activities. They come together under the umbrella of the NFVLS to share ideas and information and to co-operate in the development of different approaches to their work. Member groups share the common aim of enabling people to gain greater confidence in their own abilities and greater control over their own lives.

If you want to know more about our work, our members or our ideas contact us at NFVLS, Cambridge House, 131 Camberwell Road, London SE5 0HF.

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Broadcasting Support Services is an educational charity which started life in 1975 as the Adult Literacy Support Services Fund and was responsible for referring adults to literacy classes after the BBC television series **On The Move.** Since then BSS has developed into a publisher of educational resources and one of the main agencies providing follow-up services for viewers and listeners of educational and social concern broadcasting.

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The authors are all members of the National Federation of Voluntary Literacy Schemes.

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Each one encourages me to think if you do work by yourself you wouldn't be so interested because you are more lonely but when you do it in a group each one strengthens each one

Written by three experienced adult education tutors **Each one strengthens each one** illustrates by example the value of group work and of basing the learning around students' own individual needs and circumstances.

What shines through in **Each one strengthens each one** is the voices of those learning and the pleasure and confidence they get from their achievements.

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